# FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
## December 23, 2001

# FAMILY CONNECTIONS
## John M. Buchanan

For he who kindled
The fire of the sun
He who draws out the tender leaves
From the dark twigs of winter ...
Has also carved our names
In the palm of his hand.
And he became a child
The better to be near us.

Born in the winter-time
Born on a journey
  to be our healing ..
Our bread .. the wine
At all our weddings

*Here on Earth*
Anne Porter

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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FAMILY CONNECTIONS
DECEMBER 23, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 96
Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-26

*Dear God, we come here today to be with you and with one another. We've been busy working hard to get all our holiday responsibilities accomplished and we've been carrying an extra load of anxiety and fear and strong love since September. So in this hour as we hear the story and sing the carols, be present with your peace. Startle us, O God, with the simple beauty of the story of your son's birth. Amen.*

It's the fourth Sunday of Advent and we've all been working hard to make it this far through the season. We have, by my calculations, just about 24 hours to get the rest of it accomplished, whatever it is. Those of us who work here have just 28 hours until our first Christmas Eve service, 36 hours until the final 11:00 p.m. candlelight service, not that anybody should panic.

It's Christmas Sunday and as Christians we celebrate the humble story of Jesus' birth in the midst of our culture's year-end festival; featuring Santa Claus, greeting cards, gifts, parties – which to some seem only remotely related to the birth. Illustrations of the clash of the secular and religious meanings of Christmas are plentiful. In this sermon about family connections it seems permissible to tell one about mine – another grandchild story, in fact. Let me hasten to warn, however, that our new Co-Pastor became a grandmother for the first time this year and recently confided in me that she found a way to work baby Virginia into ten consecutive sermons until one of her Elders gently suggested that she cease and desist. So be prepared. This one is about a little boy who bears my name two generations away. Strapped into his chair in the back seat a few weeks ago, he was reflecting on the clash of Christology and culture with his father, the driver. He, Johnny, is five. He was talking excitedly about Santa Claus, where he lived and how he made it to everybody's house on Christmas Eve and is there any chance he might miss our house, and all those wonderful presents and how he manages to get them into the house and under the tree. His father knows a teaching moment when he sees one, so he introduced a new concept. "Yes, and before all that, God gave us baby Jesus." Johnny paused and pondered this new, and not entirely welcome or relevant information and then said "Oh – so the elves make the gifts and then bring them to Santa, and Santa takes them to God. And God checks them to see if they're all right and then God gives them back to Santa and Santa brings them to us." That's called Syncretism, I think, getting your religion and culture all mixed up and blended. But it is pretty creative, don't you agree?

In all the years of preaching Christmas sermons I have never used as a text the way the story of the birth of Jesus actually begins in the first gospel — with the genealogy of Jesus — Jesus' family connections.

It's how Matthew begins:

> "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."
>
> Then comes Jesus' family tree…
> "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob," — exactly fourteen generations to King David.
>
> And then 14 more generations "David was the father of Solomon…" down to the deportation to Babylon, the exile.
>
> 14 more generations bring Jesus' family line right to "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the messiah."

And then, the most peculiar thing happens….having invested so much energy in documenting Jesus' family tree — Matthew says it doesn't really matter because Joseph really isn't Jesus' father. Matthew is like people I know who travel to Salt Lake City and do research in the Mormons' genealogical library, or spend vacation time in the national library in Edinburgh to discover who first came to America, and from where and why, because it somehow helps us know who we are to — to know to whom we are connected. Having gone to all the trouble to walk us through a long list of names, most of which mean nothing to us, Matthew suddenly, abruptly says — all of this doesn't matter. Never mind — Matthew seems to be saying. Its Joseph's family tree and Joseph — as you are about to see wasn't really Jesus' father. So, why is Matthew telling us more than anybody ever wanted to know about Joseph's family connections? It is one of the enigmas in New Testament scholarship and — because, frankly, it seems to be more about Joseph than Jesus — unless, unless there is an important intentionality at work here.

Matthew begins the story of Jesus with his family connections — and doesn't waste a lot of time with the birth itself. Luke takes care of that; spends a lot of time getting us ready, telling us about Elizabeth and Zechariah and angels' visiting, and the annunciation to Mary and her Magnificat, and a census and a long journey, and a crowded inn, and a stable and manger, and shepherds on the hill side, and angel choruses singing. Matthew, on the other hand tells us about a big family and then abruptly "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." And then what he tells us actually focuses more on Joseph. Matthew tells us how Joseph makes the painful and humiliating discovery that his fiancé is pregnant. Since they are engaged, betrothed was the word, the law treats her as an already married woman. Joseph could insist that she be tried and stoned to death. But, Joseph is a good man and I like to think that he loves Mary. And so, instead of invoking the law he decides simply to arrange for her to go away and be pregnant away from the accusing eyes of neighbors, have her baby discreetly, and then each will go their separate ways. And then Joseph has a dream – an angel tells him to marry Mary: that the child conceived in her is from God. I've always imagined that was not easy for him – to believe, to trust and to do. Joseph is one of the real heroes in the Bible, I believe — a man who manages to overcome his wounded pride and offended morality and do the right thing. In the process, even before Jesus is born, Joseph shows that in a conflict between law and love, love prevails.

Joseph's whole family makes it into the story. Jesus is connected to all those people – that seems to be the point Matthew wants us to get. And another point which seems its direct opposite. Matthew also wants to know that in Jesus — Joseph and his whole family were adopted into the family of God.

He was, Matthew claims, Emmanuel, God with us. He was fully human, born the way each of us is born. In him God, incredibly, lived our life, lived as one of us, with all the beauty and love and sadness and joy and loss that is human life.

This is a God you can count on, Matthew says, a God who knows everything there is to know about being human.

And in this child, we — all of us — have been adopted into God's family.

He — Jesus — Emmanuel — is God with us.

The essence of Christmas is the conviction that in Jesus of Nazareth, in his birth in Bethlehem, God purposefully, intentionally assumed the limitations of humanity — came to live with us, to show us the power and reality of love, to forgive us — for all that we have done that we think is unforgivable, to overcome everything that separates us from our best selves, to show us — in him — the power of God's love and therefore to give us the gifts of peace and joy and salvation. All of us — each of us and everyone of us who simply has the capacity to receive the gift, to overcome our fears — even of death itself, rejoice in it, and spend the rest of our days in grateful praise and grateful living.

All of us. Joseph's family tree actually make interesting reading. It's a long and distinguished line of Hebrews — but also a very human one, flawed human beings much like ourselves: Abraham who tried to save his own neck, Isaac who lied to his father and cheated his brother. It's a diverse and inclusive family and it includes a couple of gentiles who married into the family: Rahab – who also happened to be a prostitute, Ruth — who apparently seduced Boaz before they were married, and of all people, Bathsheba, who doesn't get her name in but is remembered by fastidious Matthew only as Uriah's wife.

There are two adoptions going on here Laura Mendenhall, President of Columbia Theological Seminary, says: Joseph's adoption of Jesus into his family and God's adoption of Joseph's family. What Matthew means is that in Jesus Christ all of us become part of his family — the family of God. What Christmas means essentially is that God has come among us in this humble, vulnerable, human way — to bring us back into the family, to connect us with one another and with him, our Lord, Jesus Christ. [See *Journal for Preachers, Advent 2001 with credit also to Scott Black Johnson, Austin Theological Seminary*]

One of the most poignant stories coming out of the September 11th experience was the way men and women on these airplanes and in the World Trade Centers, tried to call their families — husbands, wives, parents, children, lovers, friends…A woman interviewed recently on NPR said she never lets her children out of her sight now, without saying, "I love you."

Laura Mendenhall says that because of the birth in Bethlehem God has made us all part of God's family and so it matters. It matters how we treat each other very much.

The deepest, most precious meaning of Christmas is that God has come to us in this humble, human, vulnerable way to bring us back into the family, to connect us — through him — Jesus Christ — to our God and to one another.

It is finally an invitation that comes to each of us, particularly to those who feel that they are not connected to others, to God, particularly — and at some time that means every one of us: an invitation to a family reunion, a reunion with the God who loves us so much a child was given: a family reunion with those we love best, with friends, associates, colleagues...all of us, because of this birth, now part of the family of God.

American poet, the late Anne Porter, put it so simply and beautifully in a Christmas poem she called *Here on Earth.*

Nevertheless
Taken all together
Or taken one by one
We are the holiest
Of all of earth's creatures

For he who kindled
The Fire of the sun
He who draws out the tender leaves
From the dark twigs of winter...

Has also carved our names
In the palm of his hand

And he became a child
The better to be near us
Born in the winter-time
Born on a journey

He grew to be a man
And lived among us
To be our healing
When we were sick
Our bread
When we were hungry
To be the wine
At all our weddings

[*An Altogether Different Language – Poems 1934-1994* p. 65-66]

It is a busy time for all of us, full of activity… But in the next 48 hours may you also find a quiet moment or two to know that because of this birth in Bethlehem — you are part of a big family: you are invited to be part of God's family.

And may that invitation be for you — a source of joy, even in the midst of the frenetic, final preparations — comfort, and even as this extraordinary years ends, God's peace.

Amen.